Developmentally Appropriate Television: Putting Children First

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A decade ago, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) deregulated children's television. Since then, a virtual transformation in the marketing of programs and products to children has occurred. With deregulation it was no longer illegal to market television programs and products together; the floodgates opened for the media and toy industries to sell toys, products, television shows, videos, movies, and computer games to children in a heyday of unregulated media cross feeding. At the time of the release of the first *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* (TMNT) movie, for example, over 1,000 products bearing the TMNT logo were being marketed by over 200 companies (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1991). After much public criticism, Congress finally passed the Children's Television Act of 1990, a timid piece of legislation that does little to curb the marketing practices that have exploited children since the 1984 deregulation.

Teachers and parents noticed changes in children's play and behavior almost immediately after deregulation as the new marketing strategies quickly took hold. What adults were seeing was the deep-seated undermining of healthy development and play in a climate in which children's needs were of less importance than profits for businesses. This article examines these effects and outlines what early childhood educators can do to counteract them (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987, 1990, 1991; NAEYC 1991).

Establishing a developmental framework

Young children growing up in the United States today watch an average of four hours of TV a day or 28 hours a week. In low-income homes they spend an estimated 50% more time watching (Miedzian 1991). These figures do not include the time spent using VCRs (which, are now owned by at least two-thirds of U.S. households) or playing video games like Nintendo. Many young children spend far more time watching the TV screen than they spend in school, engaged in play, or interacting with others. When more time is spent watching TV than doing anything but sleeping, we need to ask what effect this activity is having on children's development and learning. There is a growing body of research and writing about the effects of TV watching and other screen-time activities on young children. This article attempts to consider these effects, using a developmental framework. Using such a developmental lens for looking at children's TV can help us understand what children might be learning during all those hours spent glued to the screen, whether or not the lessons are appropriate, and what can be done to counteract those factors that might be undermining development.

Children have central developmental needs in the early years, which must be met for their healthy development to occur (Bredekamp 1987; Bredekamp & Rosegrant 1992). For early childhood educators, developmentally appropriate practice means working with children in ways that support and promote their optimal development by helping them work on developmental needs. We can use this same definition for looking at children's media.

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Developing a Sense of Trust and Safety

Developing a sense of trust—a deep belief that the world is a safe place and that "I can count on being cared for and kept safe"—is central to healthy development in the early years (Erikson 1950). Adults need to create environments in which children feel that people can be trusted to respond in predictable and consistent ways (Balaban 1985; Levin 1994a, b). When children feel safe, they can learn, try out new actions and ideas, and explore their world. Young children who develop a sense of trust are more likely to approach new experiences with curiosity and openness. Those who learn to see the world as dangerous and unpredictable are more likely to approach new events and people with caution, putting more energy into self-protection than into exploring and discovering.

What children need. Appropriate television would present a world to children where people are predictable and can be trusted and where they treat each other with love and kindness. Programs should show children what they can do to feel safe and how to help others do the same. Mr. Rogers on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, for example, reminds children at the end of each show that he will be back the next day at the same time and place. Television should also support children's sense of trust by showing them that although conflicts and difficulties occur among friends and loved ones, relationships can be sustained and conflicts can be resolved. The Neighborhood of Make-Believe on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* presents such a world to children where puppet characters support and help each other amidst their conflicts and needs.

What children see on commercial TV. Many cartoon series and other popular children's shows present a world filled with violence and evil, where "bad guys" threatening the safety of "good guys" forms the basis of each episode (Hesse 1989). Heroes and heroines must be always on guard because the violent, evil forces threaten security. Shredder and the "foot soldiers" combat the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; Rita Repulsa and her fellow villains threaten to take over the universe on the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, currently the most popular show for 2- to 11-year-olds (Bickelhaupt 1994). In all of these shows, the underlying message of instability and threat is repeated over and over again, giving children the impression of a threatening and unsafe world where danger is never put to rest.

Conclusion. The violent and scary children's TV programming is developmentally inappropriate because it undermines children's sense of safety and security. It teaches children to distrust others and to expect danger and does not help them confront and resolve their conflicts and fears. Rampant and gratuitous violence replaces what is an important opportunity to show children how to resolve conflicts nonviolently and to emerge with a greater sense of trust and security. Such programming, by depicting incessant threats that are never adequately resolved, can end up actually heightening children's anxieties about their safety.

The Need for Autonomy and Connection

During the early years children attempt to do an increasing range of tasks for themselves as their own independence and autonomy develop (Erikson 1950; Kamii 1984). At the same time they also learn to participate more and more in relationships with others (Kegan 1982). A sense of belonging can help children feel secure enough to try new things, to experiment, to explore and experience their autonomy.

What children need. Developmentally appropriate TV should show children ways to act autonomously while maintaining a positive connection with others. It should present a world where people help and support each other, where people can still remain connected to others in mutually beneficial ways when they act independently. The characters on *Sesame Street* and in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe on *Mister Rogers* have individual personalities and act independently but are also part of caring communities.

What children see on commercial TV. Many cartoons and other children's programs present characters who are either closely connected to others *or* separate from them; the themes of separation and connection are presented to children as mutually exclusive. What is worse, autonomy is commonly equated with violence and hurt toward others and connection with helplessness and victimization. To be separate usually means to be male, strong and powerful, armed with weapons, unfeeling, and able to care for oneself. To be connected usually means to be female, weak, dependent, and constantly in need of rescue. Tough characters like the Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers act autonomously by using weapons against others rather than *working with* them.

Conclusion. The messages children are getting from mass media about autonomy and closeness with others do not serve their needs. Models that dichotomize independence and closeness give children a false idea about relationships with others and do little to show them how they can be *both* independent and connected with others. Such programming conveys an even more dangerous message when it demonstrates autonomy through the use of violence and injury toward others.

A Sense of Empowerment and Efficacy

To become contributing members of society, children need to develop a sense of empowerment—a belief that they have the ability to affect their world (White 1959). It is through experiencing empowerment that children develop feelings of inner strength and a belief in themselves as competent and capable people who do not need to fight and use violence to get their needs met. To develop a sense of empowerment, children have to learn exactly what actions, skills, and words will have what kinds of effects in different situations.

What children need. TV should help children feel that they can make a positive difference in the world and that it is important and valuable to try to do so. It also should provide many opportunities to learn about the wide range of things people can actually do to bring about positive change. "Mathnet" on *Square One TV* is an example of such a program for children; it shows them how they can be detectives and use math skills to solve problems.

What children see on commercial TV. On many children's programs characters display empowerment and efficacy only by using weapons and violence. Children are not shown the true effects of violent actions and instead see in these shows that violence is an acceptable way to have an effect. The wide-ranging ways that humans have for experiencing their competence are reduced to one; nonviolent ways of having an effect are omitted from the picture. The power of the Power Rangers is in using their Power Swords, Cosmic Cannons, Battle Bows, and ability to "morph" from humans into giant robot dinosaurs when the fighting gets intense, not in using their words or wits to solve their problems.

Conclusion. Much of current children's TV undermines development by failing to provide content that helps children develop a sense of empowerment. Even worse, TV content fosters a sense of disempowerment. It provides few characters that serve as models empowered to achieve positive effects in nonviolent ways and it undermines children's sense that people can make a difference in the world without fighting.

Developing a Gender Identity

It is during the early years that children first learn the label "boy" or "girl" and begin to ask, "What can I and should I do because I am a boy or a girl?" (Kohlberg 1966). The more broadly children answer this question, the more they are likely to develop to their full potential. Because young children tend to divide concepts into dichotomous categories, they easily form stereotypes about gender; things are for one gender *or* the other but not *both*. In order to develop a broad definition of their own gender and of what they are capable of doing, children need to be shown that boys and girls can do a wide range of things, many of which are common to both sexes.

What children need. To assist children in developing their full potential as girls and boys, TV should provide models of both sexes engaging in a wide range of activities. Children need to see complex characters who embody characteristics traditionally thought of as both male and female in order to open up possibilities for themselves. Mr. Rogers, a man who can put on an apron to cook and who nurtures children, is a positive role model for both girls and boys. The girls and boys on the show *Barney and Friends* also do not fit the stereotyped female and male images commonly portrayed in children's media.

What children see on commercial TV. Many of the most popular children's shows present a very narrow range of behavior options to boys and girls. Males are strong and muscle-bound characters who like to fight, especially with big weapons. There is a pervasive association of maleness with violence. Females are sweet, kind, and often sexy. They spend a lot of time caring about how they look. They are weak and helpless and often need to be rescued (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1990). The male Ninja Turtles, for example, each use a special weapon. Their companion, April, is the lone female character on the show, weighing in at "99.9 pounds, wearing chains"; she has no weapon and frequently needs a violent rescue by the Turtles.

Conclusion. TV gives children a restricted picture of what it means to be a boy or girl, exaggerating a tendency for stereotyping naturally occurring in young children. Healthy development is undermined as children's ideas of who and what they can become narrow. At the same time the gulf in understanding between the sexes widens for children as TV accentuates the differences.

Understanding How People Are Alike and Different

Young children are in the process of learning about who they are as individuals and as members of a broader society, about how they are alike and different from other people, and about how people of diverse backgrounds and experience treat each other (Derman-Sparks & The A.B.C. Task Force 1989).

What children need. TV, as a window onto the world beyond immediate experience, has the potential to expose children to diverse people and to show them how people can respect and learn from each other. The diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds of the characters who live and work together on *Sesame Street* and *Barney and Friends* provide children with a model of how diversity can enrich a community.

What children see on commercial TV. Many children's television programs promote suspicion, intolerance, and even violence against those who are different. Racial and ethnic stereotypes are common. Often, "bad guys" have characteristics that are different from the "good guys" who represent mainstream, white U.S. society. "Bad guys" are often from foreign countries and speak with foreign-sounding accents. Many are dehumanized—with computer-simulated voices, masks that disguise their faces, and maimed or robotlike bodies. Early images of the enemy as "other," as inhuman are formed; hatred and violence expressed against enemies are made to look glamorous and exciting. The language on the toy box for Chief Leo Ninja Turtle (a highly stereotyped Native American character) reflects disdain for diversity: "Don't sneeze at his feathery ceremonial headdress or he'll skewer you with his sewer spear."

Conclusion. Much of the TV that young children see today impedes their ability to develop an appreciation and respect for differences among people (Hesse 1989; Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1990). Suspicion and hatred of difference and violence against it is fostered in mass media marketed to children. There are few chances for children to see how differences among people can be worked out in nonviolent ways to everyone's benefit; few models are presented that show how differences among people can enhance human experience or broaden horizons.

Developing a Sense of Morality and Social Responsibility

Young children are developing ideas about morality, justice, and how people should treat each other (Piaget 1948; Kohlberg 1968; Gilligan 1982). They watch to see what is considered by others as good and bad as they try to figure out right and wrong for themselves. Children's tendency to divide things up into categories—either all good or all bad, all right or all wrong—makes them particularly susceptible to material presented in simple black-and-white-terms. Along with all of this, they are also trying to learn to control their aggressive impulses as they gradually learn "to use words" and other socially acceptable ways to express negative feelings (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1992).

What children need. TV should provide children with many opportunities to learn about being responsible and moral members of a community; they should see people who treat each other with kindness and respect, help one another, and work out problems without resorting to violence. It should help children get beyond the simple view of things as all good or all bad to a more complex understanding of right and wrong—for instance, by showing children situations in which characters face moral dilemmas and have to figure out the "right" thing to do. It should help them learn to decenter and gradually to coordinate different points of view (Selman 1980). Often on *Mister Rogers* and *Sesame Street,* for example, characters have different viewpoints, interests, and needs, which form the basis for specific episodes.

What children see on commercial TV. Most commercial television programs for children present one-dimensional characters who are either "all good" *or* "all bad," who lack the complexity of real human character. Questions of social responsibility and morality are not raised when good characters attack and maim bad ones. The dominant moral lessons are that Might equals right, Bad people deserve to be hurt, and Violence is the only means for solving problems. These are the basic moral lessons on all cartoons marketed to boys for the last decade.

Conclusion. Much of commercial TV undermines the development of morality and social responsibility. It shows that violence is a justified and even glamorous way to resolve conflict. It promotes simplistic moral ideas and does not help children develop tools for solving moral dilemmas. And, it provides few positive models of how people can treat each other and places little value on people treating each other with care and respect.

The Need for Meaningful Play

Play is basic to the healthy development and learning of children (Piaget 1962). It is a central vehicle through which children construct ideas and come to understand their experience. Through the process of play, children can master experiences that may have been scary or difficult for them; they can learn to think creatively, take risks, and solve problems. But in order for all this to occur, the right conditions for play must exist. Children need to be in charge of their own play—they need time, space, and props that encourage them to transform their past experiences creatively through the play process.

What children need. Children need to have rich, meaningful life experiences that they can use as content for their play, experiences that connect deeply to their developmental needs. Although television can never substitute for children's direct experiences in interacting with the world, it could provide them with the kind of content they need for their play—stories that are meaningful to them, that they can take and reorder with their own past experience, developmental needs, and imagination.

What children see on commercial TV. Much content of children's TV reflects the thinking and imagination of adults, not that of children. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, human-size turtles who were mutated by radiation and who live in a city sewer, are difficult characters for children to incorporate into their play in meaningful ways. When themes such as these—removed from children's experience and understanding—become the basis for children's play, the play is usually superficial and imitative because children have difficulty transforming these themes into elaborate play episodes. Single-purpose toys marketed along with these shows further this tendency toward imitation. The highly realistic toys focus children's attention on a single action (often a violent one). Children lose control over their play when they can no longer use props that they can shape and define according to their own evolving purposes.

Conclusion. Children's television does not help children meet their developmental needs through play. Not only does television cut deeply into play time, it also provides a narrow range of content for children to use in play. This narrow content is then reinforced by realistic, single-purpose toys that further undermine genuine play. Children end up imitating what they have seen rather than developing their own rich, unique interpretations. As a result, play is less likely to provide children with resolution of their needs and the deep, meaningful understandings that they need in order to develop optimally (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987, 1990, 1991).

Developmentally appropriate media: Putting children first

A very disturbing picture emerges when children's early developmental needs are used as the criteria for assessing current TV programming. Ideally, children's media would provide program content to help children engage positively with the issues most basic to healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development. Instead, we find that healthy growth is seriously undercut by practices that trivialize and distort children's basic developmental concerns and undermine their ability to resolve them.

Even worse, current programming diverts children from working on these issues by channeling them into an unhealthy focus on violence. As violence has increasingly become the central focus of children's programs, it can become enmeshed with the fundamental ideas children are developing about gender, empowerment, autonomy, and diversity. It is dangerous for children and society when children learn that independence and empowerment come through violence toward others. *Now, the children who first fell prey to deregulated children's TV in 1984 are entering middle and high school; among them we see an alarming increase in violence.*

The fact that television programming seriously threatens children's play only serves to increase the negative effects of television on children's development. In losing control of their play, children are losing a vital resource for making sense of experience, for learning, and for gaining the equilibrium they need for healthy development.

Early childhood educators, whose first concern is the best interests of children, have a vital role to play in influencing mass media and its effects on children. Specifically, we can use the information in this article, including the developmental framework chart (see p. 43)

- to inform parents about the harmful effects of current media on children;
- to help parents decide what media children should watch and learn how to help children use

the media they do see to support development;

- as a mechanism in their communities for getting local programmers to provide more appropriate programming;
- as a tool for educating policymakers about how and why current programming injures children and promotes violence and what appropriate programming might be;
- as a resource for working with other organizations in advocating for more appropriate children's programming; and,
- as a guide for deciding how to intervene in the classroom in order to minimize the harmful effects of mass media on children.

[How to implement these suggestions is complex and cannot be adequately discussed here; each could be the subject of a separate article. Many of the references and addresses listed on p. 44 will assist you in beginning to put the ideas suggested here into practice.]

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The FCC must consider its responsibility to children and society at a time when violence among youth has risen dramatically alongside an industry that has fostered glamorized violence in children's media for nearly a decade. *The Commission has a responsibility to children, parents, and all of society to set standards for children's television based on sound knowledge about what children need for healthy development.* The FCC must provide guidelines about what is developmentally appropriate program content for children and, most importantly, must ban the linkup of children's programs with toys and other products, as it did before 1984. Without strong regulations by the FCC to protect children from the marketing practices that undermine their healthy development, the situation will not significantly change for the better.

A Developmental Framework for Assessing Television

Developmental issues—	*What children see on TV—*	*What children should see—*
To establish a sense of **trust and safety.**	The world is dangerous; enemies are everywhere; weapons are needed to feel safe.	A world where people can be trusted and help each other, where safety and predictability can be achieved, where fears can be overcome.
To develop a sense of **autonomy with connectedness.**	Autonomy is equated with fighting and weapons. Connectedness is equated with helplessness, weakness, and altruism.	A wide range of models of independence within meaningful relationships and of autonomous people helping each other.
To develop a sense of **empowerment and efficacy.**	Physical strength and violence equals power and efficacy. Bad guys always return, and a range of ways to have an impact are *not* shown.	Many examples of people having a positive effect on their world without violence.
To establish **gender identity.**	Exaggerated, rigid gender divisions—boys are strong, violent, and save the world; girls are helpless, victimized and irrelevant to world events.	Complex characters with wide-ranging behaviors, interests, and skills; commonalities between the sexes overlapping in what both can do.
To develop an **appreciation of diversity** among people.	Racial and ethnic stereotyping. Dehumanized enemies. Diversity is dangerous. Violence against those who are different is justified.	Diverse peoples with varied talents, skills, and needs, who treat each other with respect, work out problems nonviolently, and enrich each others' lives.
To construct the foundations **of morality and social responsibility.**	One-dimensional characters who are all good or bad. Violence is the solution to interpersonal problems. Winning is the only acceptable outcome. Bad guys deserve to be hurt.	Complex characters who act responsibly and morally toward others—showing kindness and respect, working out moral problems, taking other people's points of view.
To have opportunities for **meaningful play.**	Program content is far removed from children's experience or level of understanding. Toys are linked to programs promoting imitative, not creative play.	Meaningful content to use in play, which resonates deeply with developmental needs; shows not linked to realistic toys so that children can create their own unique play.

Organizations to contact

Campaign for Kid's TV
Center for Media Education
1511 K Street, N.W., Suite 518
Washington, DC 20005

Center for Media Literacy
1962 S. Shenandoah
Los Angeles, CA 90034

The National PTA
TV Action Center
700 North Rush Street
Chicago, IL 60611

The Children's Defense Fund
25 E Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20001

Government addresses

Federal Communications Commission
Complaints and Investigations Office
2025 M Street, N.W., Room 8210
Washington, DC 20554

U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Telecommunications
B-331 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20525

U.S. Senate
Subcommittee on Communications
227 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

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